

77 years of conservation in our neighborhood

by Leah Eskelin



Kenai National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1941 after a grass-roots effort by big game hunters to protect dwindling wildlife populations (credit: USFWS).

What happened in 1941? So many events are tied to that year, some small and others enormous in their lasting impacts. The first paid network TV commercial aired that year. The National Gallery of Art opened in Washington, D.C. The first organ music was played at a baseball stadium.

More somber, Pearl Harbor's bombing marked the entry of the United States into World War II. On the heels of that sad event, President Roosevelt signed an executive order creating the Kenai National

Moose Range on December 16th. Here's a link to a more detailed account of how the refuge came to be: https://www.fws.gov/refuge/Kenai/what_we_do/Community/09302011.html.

Since its establishment, the Kenai National Moose Range, now Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, has actively contributed to the way of life found on the Kenai Peninsula: public access to lands and waters conserved for fishing, hunting, hiking, camping, canoeing, solitude, green space. It's hard to imagine life

on the Kenai without our homes backing up to the forest, our families having short drives to free campgrounds, or our boats slipping into the water at free boat launches.

How has the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge been your neighbor this year?

Have your kids explored the outdoors on a field trip or at summer camp? The Refuge hosted four weeks of camp and months of school programs, partnered with Alaska Geographic and Kenaitze Indian Tribe for three other summer camps, and visited the library and local preschools for some indoor fun.

Has your family hiked a trail with a Ranger? Discovery Hikes were back and stronger than ever. Ranger Amber and Volunteer Hosts Gail and Bill gathered quite a following on their weekly guided walks in the Skilak Wildlife Recreation Area. Missed the fun in 2018? More hikes, on more trails and designed for all fitness levels are scheduled for Fridays in summer 2019.

The Refuge opened a new trail off Skilak Lake Road in 2018, broke ground on a second one in town along Ski Hill Road, and partnered with the local horsemen's association to improve a historic trail to access land near Tustumena Lake. If you haven't checked out the new Marsh Lake Trail, add it to your plans! Growing out of a rehabilitation project after fighting the Card Street Fire in 2015 and after contributions of skill from every department of the Refuge, this trail opened to the public in a weekend event called Termination Dust Celebration. Marsh Lake Trail is great for hiking, skiing or snowshoeing in every season and it's just three short miles from Sterling!

Quiet evenings aren't ideal for everyone. Thankfully the long days of summer can help the more spirited outdoorsman find adventure on the refuge. Have you fished for salmon at the Russian River Ferry? Finding that perfect hole by the powerline or wading out to the confluence island as the river runs red with sockeye is perfection to many of the refuge's neighbors. Seasonal rangers and volunteer hosts piloted a new program for visitors at the ferry landing this year. They offered interactive educational programs on bear safety, fishing tips, and even "How not to poop in the woods" guidance to reduce human waste. These programs will return for summer 2019, along with our daily ranger visits to help folks enjoy their day safely. Rangers are a wealth of local knowledge, too.

If day trips aren't enough, you can be a refuge neighbor overnight. Have you stayed at a Refuge

Public-Use Cabin? Sitting by a warm fire, looking out at soft lake waves while a loon calls out an evening song can't be beat. Fourteen cabins can be reserved online at the newly redesigned www.recreation.gov. Two other cabins are first come, first served. A dedicated cabin crew works year-round to keep these buildings looking their best. Front-country cabins include a row boat in the summer months but don't be scared off from a winter stay. Some of the most happy and rejuvenating visits have been recorded in the cabin journals by winter guests.



Participants at the 2018 Termination Dust Celebration took aim at invasive species like ticks and earthworms while learning archery skills (credit: Leah Eskeelin/USFWS).

New in 2018 was a partnership with Kenaitze Indian Tribe's Daggeyi Internship Program. This summer-long internship brought cultural programs to the Kenai Refuge Visitor Center in Soldotna and a new guided walk to the Russian River in the Squilantnu Archaeological District. Interested in learning more about the rich cultural history of the Kenai Peninsula? Watch for more hands-on programming in town and out in the Skilak area in 2019!

The history of this place, the land now called Kenai National Wildlife Refuge and held in trust for all future generations, began well before 1941. As neighbors who are each drawn to its majesty, its wildlife, its diverse landscapes, we each play a role in writing the next chapter in the Kenai's story.

This weekend marks the 77th year of conservation for Kenai Refuge. Please join Refuge managers and staff for refreshments, free interactive family activities, and more at a Visitor Center Open House this Sat-

urday, December 15, from noon until 4pm. Our Visitor Center is located at 33398 Ski Hill Road in Soldotna. Call 907-260-2820 for more information.

Leah Eskelin is a Visitor Services Park Ranger at

the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge who loves bringing fun hands-on nature programs to the public every month. Check out the events schedule at kenai.fws.gov or www.facebook.com/kenainationalwildliferefuge.



Autumn arrives on Skilak Lake Road in October 2018 (credit: Leah Eskelin/USFWS).